Community Assistantship Program

Saving Traditional American Seeds:
Preserving Culture Through Gardening

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Prepared in partnership with
Dream of Wild Health Network

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In May 2000, I began a Research Assistantship with the *Dream of Wild Health Network* (DWHN), a program of *Peta Wakan Tipi* ("Sacred Fire Lodge" in the Lakota language). The mission of the *Dream of Wild Health Network* is to 1) gather traditional plants from medicine people and elders before they pass on; 2) become the seed saver for indigenous American Indian plants in the Upper Midwest; and 3) preserve and share our precious cultural heritage before it disappears forever. *Dream of Wild Health* applied for and was granted a student research assistant position by the Community Assistantship Program (CAP) of the University of Minnesota.

It has been my great personal honor to be that research assistant. I bring experience from many years of plant identification and study with locally- and nationally-recognized herbalists, three seasons of work with organic gardeners, an Advanced Tutor Certification from the College Reading and Learning Association, and experience in laboratory science courses. These courses included work germinating, growing, pollinating and documenting results of two generations of Wisconsin Fast Plants™ (*Brassica Rapa*), a plant species hybridized to complete a full breeding cycle in 35 days.

A primary objective laid out for the project this season was to propagate traditional Native American vegetable varieties (e.g., corn, beans, squash and tomatoes) as well as medicinal and ceremonial plants including sage, tobacco, and sweetgrass. The seeds of these plants were entrusted to *Dream of Wild Health* by tribal elders, leaders and medicine people. Many of the medicinal plants needed to be identified and moved from the wild to the women's medicine garden. My skills in plant identification were useful here as well as my gardening experience. These skills were also very helpful when guiding volunteers who helped with the weeding.

Another objective was to create a women's medicine garden. Ground for the women's garden was broken in June and the space blessed by Yako Myers. Plans for the garden were finalized and sketches made at the first annual Ethnobotany Conference at Warner Nature Center, Lino Lakes, Minnesota, over the June 10 weekend. The next week we began landscaping and planting. Paul Red Elk and Yako Meyers both presented at the conference. Kindi Haralu, another research assistant, and I staffed a table for *Dream of Wild Health* during the conference, explaining the purpose and goals of the organization, showing examples of seeds and displaying photographs of the plants and gardens.

A skill not included on my resume but which came in very handy is my construction experience. *Dream of Wild Health* was given a tool-shed kit that required a good deal of time and energy to erect. We were helped by a number of volunteers I coordinated for that particular project. One of the other areas where volunteers and our other student research assistant, Leslie Mahle, were most crucial was in keeping up with the enormous task of weeding, an ongoing problem in an organic garden. Through working beside Bob White, an elder who tended the garden regularly, my understanding of and respect for Native American culture and the process of caring for plants expanded and my planting and weeding techniques improved.

For the past two years, *Dream of Wild Health* has been working with the *Golden Eagles*, a Native American youth group. I had hoped that my experience tutoring and as a teacher's assistant would be helpful when the group came to experience the garden. Unfortunately, the kids did not come out to the garden as often as we had hoped. However, when they did come they enjoyed themselves and were able to help out. The scarecrows they made with Paul Red Elk and Sally Auger, and later helped put up, were wonderfully conceived and very effective.

We were successful in establishing the women's medicine garden. The space and individual beds are in place. Many of the plants are in the ground and well established. There are still plants that need to be planted that we were unable to identify definitively or were not available in the immediate area. The construction of a sweat lodge will wait until spring.

Fortunately the postponement of building a sweat lodge was due, in part, to a bountiful harvest that occupied our time from mid-September on. Many of the corn species, such as the four Mandan varieties, had begun tasseling in June and had grown to a height of about a foot. These produced a few small ears that were difficult to hand-pollinate because the appearance of the pollen and silks did not necessarily coincide. It may be perfectly normal for these species to behave in the observed manner. It is likely, however, that the age of the seeds (approximately 40 years), time spent in the greenhouse as well as soil and weather conditions contributed to the difficulty in propagating these seeds. Further trials are needed to understand the normal habits of these ancient varieties and to secure a future supply of these seeds. Other corn varieties did very well, and provided a good supply of seeds for next year.

The beans were also a mixture of success and disappointment. The Potawatami Lima beans and Red Lima beans, both of which grow on vines, did wonderfully. By mid-August they were over 70" long and eventually put out a great number of pods. Unfortunately, some did not fully develop before the frost. The Potawatami Rabbit beans and Yellow Woman beans, which are bush beans, suffered greatly from leafhopper damage. Other growers confirmed that leafhoppers were particular destructive this season. The beans were still able to produce a new supply of seeds. These, as well as seeds of the Cherokee Purple tomatoes (which produced an average of about 15 fruits per plant), represent an amazing accomplishment when one considers that many of the seeds came from the Cora Baker collection, seeds that have not been grown in 40 years!

Working with *Dream of Wild Health* I have learned many new skills, such as hand pollination of corn, seed preservation, new plant identification, and ritual practices used in Native American gardening. Most remarkable has been learning the ways and traditions of the indigenous people of this region. I have known of the sacredness of tobacco for a long time, but to experience holding it and then placing it on the ground while a prayer is sung before planting, then planting and tending the plants knowing that there is a long list of ancestors who have cared for these seeds and who have put them in the hands of *Dream of Wild Health* and that they in turn have entrusted me with this task is a truly awesome gift. The majestic tobacco plants themselves inspire awe. Knowing

that the harvesting, drying and subsequent dispersal of this tobacco to indigenous people will facilitate interconnection among community groups and foster a link between the past and the present has given me a sense of great achievement.

The season started late due to a shortage of labor and heavy rains, though the rains helped establish the plants once they were in the ground. The women's medicine garden was established and will continue to grow in years to come. The medicinal plants, along with three varieties of squash, two of sunflowers, four of beans, eight of corn, seven of tobacco, and one variety of tomato were grown with varying degrees of success. All produced collectable seeds, though some only just enough to replace what was planted. To catalog these seeds and plants and make information about them available, data is being brought together in a database and a website is under development.

Many of the objectives of the research assistantship were met; however, improvement is needed in the area of data collection. Paul Red Elk photographed the plants throughout the growing season, Leslie Mahle monitored the corn, and I took measurements and made notes. Plant survival took precedence over data collection, however: Many times measurement-taking was displaced by the cumulative task of checking each cornstalk, hand pollinating each ear, and pulling weeds that were strangling the tobacco, beans or corn. From a research perspective, data collection is fundamental. From the perspective of a people racing to preserve and protect what is still only barely within grasp, propagation of seeds is paramount. This project is vital to the survival of traditional food plants and medicinal and ceremonial herbs to which indigenous peoples are the rightful heirs. In the final analysis a stronger balance must be struck between desired objectives and available resources, while maintaining the necessary scope of the project.

Working with the *Dream of Wild Health* has been an invaluable experience. The *Dream of Wild Health* seeds have a powerful relationship with Native Americans of the Upper Midwest and all of North America and are a necessary link from the past through to the future. There is a great deal more to be learned, such as plant nutritional components and their implications for the health of Native Americans, and understanding the plant growth habits and preferred conditions. As a student looking toward an eventual degree in ethnobotany, I look forward to maintaining a strong relationship with *Dream of Wild Health*, as a student worker, mentor or community resource for these future efforts.